

Testimony in Support of Raised Bill No. 6519
“An Act Concerning the Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food”

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March 15, 2013

Distinguished Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am the Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester and a resident of Glastonbury. Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Raised Bill No. 6519, “An Act Concerning the Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food.”

I wholeheartedly agree that any food meeting the definition of “genetically engineered” as set forth in this bill ought to be labeled as such.

Based on my research and the research of members of my congregation’s Sustainable Living Committee, it is clear to me that there is not yet a consensus in the scientific community on the long-term health impacts that result from consuming genetically engineered food. As long as the long-term health impacts remain unknown, it is morally unconscionable to deny consumers the right to know what they are purchasing and eating. Even if there were a consensus in the scientific community that genetically engineered foods pose no health risks whatsoever, the idea that critical information about the nature and substance of a particular food product would not be made available to consumers through labeling still seems highly problematic. Our right to know what we are purchasing and eating may not be enshrined in the Constitution, but in the very least consumers who want to know what they are purchasing and eating ought to have easy access to that information. It’s a matter of fairness. It’s a matter of honesty.

It’s also a matter of encouraging competition in the market place. There is also ample evidence that many consumers would change their behavior if they knew which foods were genetically engineered. A 2008 CBS/*New York Times* poll found that more than half of American consumers would choose not to buy genetically engineered foods if such foods were properly labeled, and 87 percent wanted all genetically engineered ingredients to be labeled. A 2010 Consumers Union poll found that 95 percent of U.S. consumers favor mandatory labeling of meat and milk from genetically engineered animals. But in the absence of labeling, consumers have no way to make the informed food choices they would otherwise make. Removing choice from the market in this way seems contrary to the spirit of our capitalist economic system. It also allows food producers to avoid their responsibility to act as good corporate citizens and abide by the principle of “truth in advertising.” When corporations behave in ways that are potentially harmful to consumers, it is government’s responsibility to provide regulation. If we’re going to allow genetically engineered food to be sold in our grocery stores, the very least government can do is mandate labeling.

Finally, I have concerns about the long-term impact of genetically engineered foods on our agricultural eco-systems. While such foods create distinct benefits in terms of food volume and resistance to bugs and disease, there are many unanswered questions regarding their long-term

impact. What kinds of unforeseen plant and animal diseases might arise in response to the introduction of these foods on our farms? Might the introduction of genetically engineered foods reduce the overall resilience of agricultural eco-systems? We don't know the answers to these kinds of questions. And because we do not have the answers, I would not purchase genetically engineered foods if I knew of their presence on my grocery store shelves. But currently I have no way of knowing what I'm purchasing and eating. I maintain it is the government's responsibility to preserve my ability to make informed choices as a consumer. Therefore, I urge you to vote in favor of Raised Bill 6519.

Thank You.